

Ash Wednesday-2021

Joel 2: 12-19

Matt. 6: 16-21

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

DMV! What comes to mind with those letters? The Department of Motor Vehicles. This is the site at which many of us can receive the most unflattering and humiliating photographs that can be taken in our lifetimes, AND they are public record to boot!! Not to be neglected is the fact you and I are stuck with them on our driver’s license for 5 years. In this age of digital cameras we at least have the option of deleting those stunning moments captured by our families—you know the ones—the snapshot flashed as you are trying to put a taco or hotdog gracefully in your mouth, or the one taken in the instant you are distracted by a movement to the side resulting in an image that can be described as somewhere between startled and deranged. As Dan Rather once commented, “The Camera Never Blinks”.

The image(s) we carry and present of ourselves are terribly important. These mental, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual pictures are representations of our sense of who we are. They capture the way we define ourselves and often have roots deep in our experience of family, life challenges, and faith. There is a program available for phone cameras and computers that will allow your picture to be manipulated in some rather unflattering ways. There are times when the self-perceptions we carry are a bit blurry and inaccurately developed. They are more pretend and pretense than true.

The way in which we view and evaluate ourselves can take on a false hue in both positive or in negative tones. For instance, it may be that we undersell ourselves and denigrate who we are as God’s own creation. We have all known persons who extract a sense of guilt that is not in keeping with who they really are. If something goes wrong, then surely they failed. Or we can operate with a false humility that fails to see the actual flaws in our character and ignore the impact they have. What is particularly vital is these portraits we have of who we are be **true and authentic**. In reality we sometimes present to God, the world, and even ourselves masks that cover realities we do not want to know, and do not permit others to see. And sometimes we get confused to the point that we confuse our masks for what is actually underneath. That is when we play at life rather than play in life.

The Gospel for today out of St. Matthew is from the Sermon on the Mount. On first blush it may appear to be a long distance from Jesus’ sayings to the observance of Ash Wednesday. After all we are not really all that concerned about fasting, or standing on the street corners praying, and these days our alms come by way of mail, but to focus there would be to miss the mark of both this day and this lesson. “Do not be like the hypocrites.” The word “hypocritai” comes from Greek drama—it refers to one who wears a mask and acts or pretends to be something or someone they are not. Jesus calls us to look behind the masks we wear and to see ourselves as we really are before God. The journey of Lent which begins today is about the walk of being authentic.

So, on this day there are 2 things to be recollected: 1) The first is to not be deceived about our nature, and 2) The second is know that we are not to be despised due to our struggles or failures—**and make sure you hear both of those!!!!** Today is experienced with the ending of Lent clearly in view. Do not isolate Ash Wednesday from the cross and resurrection. Our journey must be marked by that for true penitence is framed not by morbid self-examination, but by coming to realize the great cost God has paid to break forth his love upon us! Walking toward that love burns away what is false in us.

Do not be deceived. In the liturgy for Ash Wednesday the priest marks the forehead of each parishioner and says, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return”. At a surface level this may sound morbid and demeaning, but at a deeper level it is a simple reminder of our nature and that life is transient. We are asked not to be deceived about life. These words call us to realize we do not have time to waste time on nothingness. And they beckon us to consider how we do spend ourselves along the way. Have we taken paths that pursue the trivial, chase after excess or self-gratification? Has our focus simply left us with no

real sense of the presence of the God who is our only hope in the face of mortality? Lent calls us to repentance, and repentance is far more than feeling sorry for our failures and short-sightedness; it is about gaining a new vision of the path upon which God invites us to walk with Him. Recall the Psalm we prayed this evening—51, “against you only have I sinned and done what is evil...” And then, we pray, “Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me”. This awakening is the beginning of repentance and turning ourselves to God. Repentance is about asking ourselves if the picture on the license, is really who we want to be, and if not, then we have the opportunity to follow a different way—One marked by prayer, fasting, compassion, and mercy; by following Jesus’ life of being centered on God and the neighbor.

You may wonder what does prayer or fasting, or almsgiving have to do with getting closer to God and our neighbor and therefore closer to our truest life. Let me suggest that these disciplines of Lent are actually gifts that lead us toward God, because they lead us to recognize the holiness of life that our mortal nature often obscures. Prayer is simply the openness of heart to converse with God and listen. It is in a sense the act of taking our relationship with Him seriously. The giving of alms is about the practice of mercy. It imitates what God has already done for us and in doing it we may well discover that we become an emblem of divine mercy in a cold world. St. John Chrisologus commented, “you are never without the means of giving, if that gift is yourself”. We pray to become that when we say, “and here we offer and present ourselves as a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice”. Sin withholds mercy from others by focusing on self. Mercy drives us to others.

And there is fasting. (My personal favorite!). We usually speak of giving up something we crave or like. Let me offer an observation about fasting. I wonder if it is to teach us how to be hungry?! If you recall in the Beatitudes Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” To be really hungry isn’t a craving for lunch after a 6-hour lull. I often think of ‘O Brother, Where Art Thou’, when Everett, Delmar, and Pete pick up a lonely guitar player, Tommy, at a crossroads. Everett introduces all of them and then says, “Keep your hands away from Pete’s mouth; he hasn’t had a decent meal in three months”. Hunger is to have an undeterred desire for that which will complete and fill us. Fasting provides a bodily experience which propels us toward God’s grace and life. It reminds us that some food is more precious than other—Eucharist, Grace, Peace. All of these remind us that God does not despise anything he has made!!

When my oldest granddaughter, Madelyn, was about four months of age we bought her a small towel which had a cute teddy bear on one edge. To our utter surprise the first time she saw it she took in a deep breath, formed her little mouth in an oval, and her eyes lit up as if she could not believe the beauty of what she was seeing. It was as if a new world had appeared right in front of her. Lent is God’s gift which allows us to see the great love he has for us, and in light of that love to measure if who we have become causes the Lover of Humankind pain. Lent asks us to come back from our sin, from seeking to be the center of attention in all things, from trying to live without grace, from all those attitudes and actions that cause us to lose our way, and to once again walk the way of Jesus. And in the process there is a promise that God will not allow us to walk that way unaided or alone, and with a new picture to carry with us—as children of the Father. Amen+